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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE
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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: February 08, 2007

New Coalition Conflict About Care for the Elderly

¶1. A conflict is under way between Minister for Economy and Labor Martin Bartenstein and Minister for Social Issues Erwin Buchinger about the former's proposal for a new model for elderly care. Buchinger called the Bartenstein initiative "counterproductive" and said the proposal should not have been put forth before consultations with his Ministry and the social partners. The Bartenstein model has also generated controversy between trade unions and aid organizations such as Caritas, who criticize the model as developed by the Ministry, and industry, which applauds it.

The sore point about the new proposal put forth by Bartenstein's Ministry of Economy and Labor is the question of financing, writes independent daily "Der Standard." With costs reaching up to 3,000 euros per month, the domestic care is considered far too expensive for most persons in need of care. According to Minister for Social Issues Erwin Buchinger, the Bartenstein model makes no sense without an adequate proposal for state-subsidized financing. The daily points out there are numerous possible approaches to solving the problem, but the government is apparently not able or willing to grant the additional funding necessary to implement any of them. Opposed to the Bartenstein proposal are also aid organizations - Caritas Director Michael Landau was quoted by "Der Standard" as saying that "all the sums currently in circulation present an insurmountable hurdle for most people in this country" - and the trade unions, which claim that the work load of caregivers would be too great.

Break-In Into Greens Parliamentary Club

¶2. There was a break-in Wednesday night into the offices of Green party parliamentarians Peter Pilz and Werner Kogler. A computer and camera were stolen and several file cabinets opened by force. Some of the cabinets contained Eurofighter files, and the Greens suspect the break-in is connected to Pilz and Kogler's work on the Eurofighter committee.

Gusenbauer and Merkel Agreed on University Controversy

¶3. On his first trip abroad as Chancellor, Alfred Gusenbauer secured German Chancellor Merkel's support in the controversy between Austria and the EU about quotas for German medical students who want to enroll in Austrian universities. Restrictions on admissions to German med schools leads many German students to apply to Austrian schools, which have crowding problems of their own. Centrist daily "Die Presse" analyzes the Gusenbauer visit to Berlin primarily in terms of his ability to extract concessions from

Chancellor Merkel with regard to this crucial issue. So far, it appears he has been fairly successful - Merkel agreed to back the Austrian position, according to which 75 percent of all places in medical schools will be reserved for Austrian students, 20 percent for EU citizens, and 5 percent for non-EU citizens. However, it is unclear whether the German support will make much of an impression on the EU Commission. On Wednesday, Frederic Vincent, spokesman of EU Commissioner for Education Jan Figl, told "Die Presse" that "nothing has changed. We have sent Austria a letter and the government in Vienna has two months to react to it." The Austrian quotas were "a discrimination against EU citizens by a member country" - and as such constituted a clear violation of one of the EU's legal principles. A bilateral agreement between Berlin and Vienna would probably not change this, Vincent maintained.

World-Wide Child Pornography Ring Discovered

14. The Austrian police dealt its heaviest blow to date to child pornography by exposing an internationally-operating child pornography ring with 2,361 suspects in 77 countries. The youngest victim was five years old. Minister of the Interior G|nther Platter credited the FBI and other international law-enforcement agencies for their involvement, and announced that a tightening of criminal law regulations for child pornography was conceivable. All Austrian media report on what Minister of the Interior G|nther Platter called the "biggest case of circulation" of porn videos ever disclosed in Austria. In July, an internet provider in Vienna, which had discovered eight videos that had been put onto its server by unknown sources, alerted the police. Films offered for a purchase price of 89 US dollars could be traced to a Russian website. The Austrian operation "Flo," in which Europol and the FBI were involved as well, led to investigations on several continents, reports independent daily "Der Standard." Most suspects come from the US (607), Germany (466) and France (114) - in Austria, 23 persons accessed the website. In 2004, Austria introduced more severe punishments for the possession of child porn material and now is among the 22 countries with the most far-reaching laws against child pornography, writes independent daily "Salzburger Nachrichten."

Blacker on Transatlantic Relations

15. Coit Blacker, former Clinton Administration national security staffer and currently a professor at Stanford University, now in Vienna lecturing at the Diplomatic Academy, gave an interview to mass circulation daily "Kurier," analyzing the reasons for recent problems in the transatlantic relations, and the differences between Europe and the US with regard to conflict resolution and the use of military force.

According to Blacker, the deterioration of the transatlantic relations over the past few years is not so much the Iraq war than something related to the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern block - which put an end to the mutual dependence in a geo-strategic sense. Freed of the need to stick to each other, the US reverted to unilateralism, while Europe moved in a different direction. Americans and Europeans had different approaches to international conflict resolution, Blacker maintained: "The European opinion that the US is quick to use weapons is true, considering how the Europeans solve international problems. However, in the US view, the Europeans are so slow in resorting to force that a larger tragedy can ensue from non-action. This is a notable but not an unbridgeable difference. The same is true for the death penalty. Hardly any American will deny a state the right to kill. What seems problematic to me is the way this is implemented."

US Offensive in Baghdad Has Begun

16. According to US military spokesman Major General William Caldwell, the expected all-out offensive of Iraqi and American military forces against insurgents in the Iraqi capital began on Wednesday. Several units have already begun to implement the projected security plan which the Iraqi government has devised for Baghdad, Caldwell said. Another source, Major Robbie Parke, told news agency AFP that 2,000 US and several hundred Iraqi soldiers have begun to comb the Sunni quarter Adhamiya for insurgents and weapons.

General Caldwell reported the loss of a "Chinook 20" helicopter. It is as yet unclear whether the helicopter came down because of a technical defect or was shot down by rebels, as a Sunni organization

with connection to al-Qaida has claimed, reports independent daily "Salzburger Nachrichten." It is the fifth helicopter lost by US troops during the past two weeks. The daily also refers to the growing political pressure on the US administration to hasten its withdrawal from Iraq. Even Secretary of Defense Robert Gates admitted before the Senate defense committee that one would have to "consider alternatives," if the military offensive should fail. He did not rule out that withdrawal might begin as early as the end of this year.

McCaw